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"You have lived a life of a hundred year old man
and you're only twenty-four years old."

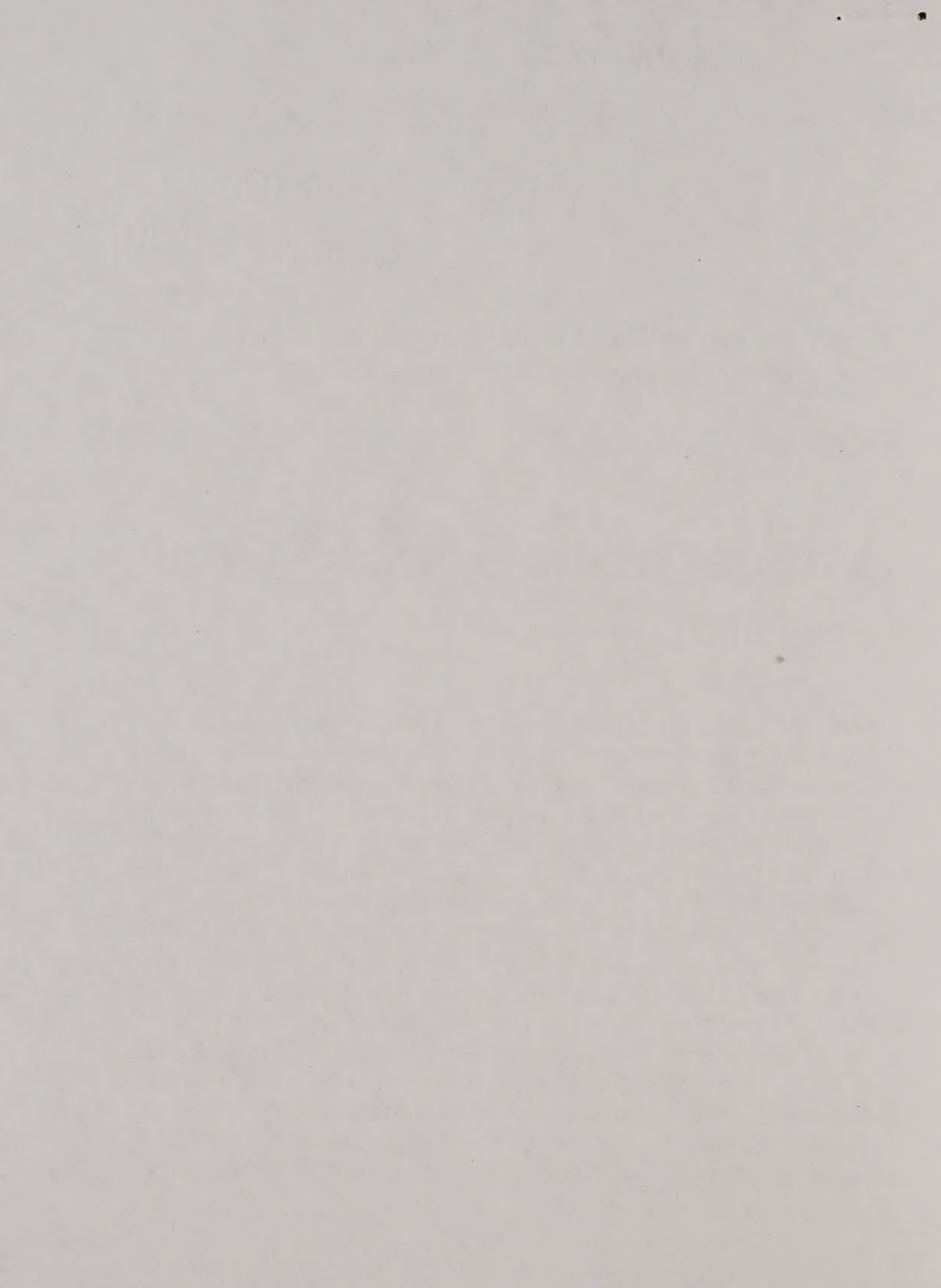
Vanya from Solna Street

BY SALOMEA KAPE

SOLNA Street, the shortest street in Lodz, divided the slums of Baluty from the better part called "City." Other streets were given new names fitting the political ideology of the ever-changing times. Only Solna remained Solna, a street too small to be named after Polish kings, heroes, martyrs or important events in the stormy history of Poland.

During World War II the City of Lodz disappeared from German maps; it was replaced by *Litzmannstadt* and Litzmannstadt's streets acquired new names with a Nazi-Wagnerian ring to them. Only Solna was transliterated to *Saltz Strasse*, which sounded, well, as dull and prosaic as Solna.

On Solna Street the windows of the five old buildings on one side faced the windows of four old buildings on the other side and one could see through the cheap half curtains the daily lives of families confined in one room or one room and a half, the half being the kitchen. Sometimes a long, gossipy chat would go on



across the street among the women sitting in the windows during the short Polish summers and breathing the malodorous air from the nearby channel, Lodka. There was little traffic on the narrow street, barely a *droszka* went through, and the children played safely in the middle of the block. From Solna Street one could see the monument of Kosciuszko, blackened from the heavy smoke which hangs over Lodz like a dirty veil, towering over the city right in the center of Freedom Square.

On Friday nights the air in Solna carried a blend of heavy odors from Lodka, of the sweet smell of challahs and of stuffed carps. Behind the curtains was the flickering flames of candles. Jews, in their best Sabbath attire holding a prayer book under their arms, walked to the synagogues. They walked hesitantly, cautiously. The Sabbaths were wrapped in the warning: don't be too loud, you are only a tenant in this land which is not famous for tolerance of other religions and which is very suspicious of a different culture. The families on Solna Street sat quietly on Friday nights around their tables for candle blessing and supper.

Mark was born on Solna Street; he was two years younger than his sister Mala and a few years older than his two brothers. He and Mala had their father's blue eyes, straight nose, thin lips, blond hair and a skin which turned golden-bronze during the summer. Unlike her father, Mala was tall, like her Uncle Moses, the six-footer. The two smallest boys inherited their mother's dark, big eyes, brown, thick hair and milky-white complexion.

Their living room, with its traditional, long, high polished table and six sturdy chairs, was transformed at night into a bedroom for Mark and the two little boys. The silver and shining crystal stood in full display on the heavy credenzas. Even the kitchen served as a bedroom, for Uncle Ruben set up a cot each evening and took it down early in the morning. The folded cot covered with a serviette functioned as sort of a shelf. Only Mala had a room for herself. Mark, often unsupervised, soon found an outlet for his energy in soccer. Mala covered Mark's many escapades at the sport's club and kept him out of trouble, but it all came to an abrupt end when Joel Kansky, their father, was summoned to their school.

Mr. Kansky returned from his visit in a rage. He, a pious Jew, an owner of a small factory, who was always dressed neatly in Hasidic garb, ranted on in his heavily accented Lodzer Yiddish.

"Mark, you're doing poorly in school, you're behind in reading and writing. The teachers cannot understand what's wrong with you. But I know what's wrong. You're spending all your time on sports. You don't follow Jewish laws, and look at yourself. You're dressed like a street boy, a hooligan. You don't even cover your head. When was the last time you went to the temple? You're wasting very precious time for nothing. I've decided that you'll help me in the factory. You must earn the bread you eat."

Mr. Kansky kept stroking his hair and well-kept short beard. His blue eyes expressed concern and embarrassment. He was a valued member of the Jewish community and chairman of a philanthropic board. On Solna Street and its vicinity he was highly respected. The German owner of the building, Herr Hartman, greeted him with the friendliest smile, for Joel had given him good advice and financial help during the Depression when both of them suffered monetary losses and were on the verge of bankruptcy. They both recovered, kept their businesses afloat, and enjoyed a long-lasting friendship. Herr Hartman's son, Hans, was Mark's childhood friend.

Mark looked at his father and then down at his soccer togs. He couldn't fit into the Hasidic garb and into the restrictive way of religious laws, for he was in love. In love with a ball, in love with the soccer game. How could he explain his constant struggle in school with written words? The letter T, to him, resembled P and P looked like B and together they formed a puzzle impossible to decipher. Math presented no problems, the numbers stood straight and clear and he advanced in arithmetical processes effortlessly, but he was helpless in the strange world of reading.

"Fine with me," he said. "I'd rather work than go to school."

Yes, to work for his father was the best solution for it allowed more time for soccer.

His coach talked to him eye to eye. "Mark," he said, "you have the potential to become a very good player. You're small and energetic, with good endurance, and you have developed smart

strategies. BUT...you must work on your speed and you need better muscles in your legs. Now, I heard that you're interested in boxing, too. Forget it! Never mention it again! You're too soft, you don't have a killer's instinct. Concentrate only on soccer and I'll make you a star."

The praise, ah, the praise made Mark proud and the successes on the soccer field reinforced his devotion to the game. Evenings, weekends, holidays—all his free time—Mark spent *developing* muscles in his calves by jumping, running, bicycling. He was of medium height, small-boned and at sixteen he looked barely fourteen, but under the tanned skin there wasn't a gram of fat; it was all muscles, hard as rocks. He always walked at a brisk pace, light on his feet as if he were kicking an invisible ball. He had an open face and those big, blue eyes, the kind that break a girl's heart.

Masha, the neighbor's daughter who went with Mark to the movies, had a crush on him. Seated in the last row at the movies, he kissed Masha straight on the lips and then couldn't watch the movie anymore, feeling hot, excited and not himself. Masha, sweet, innocent, crazy for Mark, let him touch her warm, young body in the dark hall. When they left the movies, they were silent, ashamed to look into each other eyes, but unquenchable in their desire. They went their own separate ways, till the next Saturday matinee.

One afternoon Mark came home from the movies to find a young man in the living room, sitting at the table and drinking tea in measured sips. It was Joseph Stein, a high-ranking clerk in a Jewish bank, neatly dressed in a sort of elegant Hasidic fashion, but his young, closely shaven face was smileless. Mark saw him often on Solna Street, walking as if he were counting his steps. Even now he looked as if he were calculating the dowry he'd receive from Joel when he married his daughter, Mala. Mala was calm and looked him right in the eyes without saying a word. She now resembled her mother in the little gesture of offering sugar to the guest and in the way she tilted her head.

Mark's eyes were full of rage when he talked to Mala later.

"You don't have to marry this guy. You deserve a better husband. How could you agree to a pre-arranged marriage? You, a girl who graduated from Lyceum with the best grades. Why don't

you apply to the university?"

Mala looked at him sharply and replied, "I can't apply to Polish universities because they don't accept Jewish students, which means I would have to go abroad, which means I would need money. And what does that mean, 'I deserve better'? None of us are getting what we deserve. Joseph's educated, but a little stiff in his beliefs. He's young, good looking and he has a secure job. Besides," she said after a long pause, "I don't have the strength and the conviction to fight our parents' decision. I'm not you."

There was little that Mark could offer. His earnings, at the beginning, barely covered the cheap tickets for Saturday matinees for Masha and him. Later, when he earned more money and could have helped Mala, she was already "happily" married.

Mark had entered his job at his father's factory with an enthusiasm which he quickly lost when he was assigned to the lowest task. He learned the craft of producing cotton socks from the workers employed by his father but that wasn't all. He couldn't leave each day until he had cleaned the factory and prepared the machines for the next day. Two years at this low-paid position left Mark rich in knowledge of the inner structure of the factory but financially poor. Finally, his father promoted him; he became a buyer.

Mark loved the new job, especially because it was necessary for him to walk in the open streets from one client's shop to another. He listened attentively to his clients, Jewish shopkeepers. First they distrusted the skinny youngster who looked like the Polish boys who, on Sundays after heavy drinking, demolished their stores. But this youngster knew the prices of yarn and always paid on time. In this business many deals were sealed with a handshake. People became known for either living up to or not living up to these deals. Mark was somebody whose word could be counted on.

"Mark, how are you?" they greeted him. "Say, I have good yarn today, and the price is right."

When a deal was finished, the Jews always exchanged views of the present political situation. And the situation always caused deep sighs and sadness in their hearts.

"Bad, very bad, the anti-Semitic laws that are passing through the Polish Senate. The Poles are boycotting our stores. Did you

read of the pogrom in Przytyk? And look what's going on in Germany. Hitler, a new enemy of the Jews, is growing in power. Today is bad, but believe me, tomorrow things will be even worse."

Mark argued, "Let your boys come out to the streets, to the sun and to the fresh air of the football field to grow muscles and strength. Sports may prepare us to fight the Polish hoodlums who are looting your stores."

"We're not street fighters. You took the wrong path, Mark," they sighed. It was no use prolonging the conversation; Mark could as well talk to the wall.

Mark didn't pay too much attention to the manic voice coming on the radio waves from Germany for he was more and more occupied with the soccer team where his talent, agility, concentration, speed and alertness were deeply appreciated. He was the uncrowned king of the ball.

"That-a-boy," his beaming coach lauded him.

Nor did Mark look into the cellars where the poor Jews lived. In the spring when the sun melted the snow and ice into dirty water which ran toward the cellars, the cellars resembled little yellow ponds with beds, tables, clothing and pots floating. The penetrating odor of mildew and sewer was everywhere.

At home, Mark's mother complained bitterly. She said, "Joel, what are we to do with your brother Ruben? He was to stay with us for a month, but it is already six months. I have to cook for him and to clean after him. I am too tired. At night I hurt my legs on his cot when I go to the bathroom. Send him to your brothers, it's their turn. You're too busy with the relief committee and you have no time for me and your children. You neglected Mark and took him out of school instead of hiring a tutor. Don't repeat the mistake with the younger boys."

Mark looked at his mother disapprovingly. It made no sense blaming his father for his poor performance in school. But more important was Ruben! Mark loved his Uncle Ruben who at thirty-six had the smooth face of an innocent child, a kind word for everyone and an endless interest in soccer. He was always among the cheering crowd at the stadium. The children on the street sometimes called him *Myshuga* (madman), but they stopped after

they felt Mark's hard fist. Ruben had a job. Nobody asked what kind of a job; his salary didn't pay the rent. But his pockets were full of candies he bought for his nephews.

"Here you go again." Joel's voice was defensive. "Mark is a born businessman and for business you don't need a school. You want to throw my poor brother Ruben out into the street? He is a little slow, but he has a job. He's not a burden, Basha. One more mouth to feed is not a catastrophe for us. Where should I send him? To my brother Moses who has nine children? To Morris who can't support his own family? Have God in your heart, Basha. O.K. O.K," he said when tears came to Basha's eyes. "I'll talk to Jacob. Give me a little time. O.K. Tomorrow."

Tomorrow stretched into days, weeks, months till one night Basha hit her leg so hard that she couldn't move and Joel found her on the kitchen floor crying. Two days later Ruben put his lares and penates in a very small valise, ready to move to his rich brother Jacob, the jeweler. Joel was ominously absent and the children gathered around Ruben. Mala patted his shoulder and Mark's morose face didn't hide his feeling of resentment toward his mother. He sulked in a corner.

"Don't worry children," said Ruben. "I'll be back in no time."

And he came back before Basha's black and blue marks faded away. With new candies.

"Tutti-frutti, what a funny name. It's for you, children," Ruben said emptying his pockets. Mark helped his uncle unpack the contents of the paper bag. Rushing to return to Joel's house, Ruben had put all his belongings into the bag, leaving his valise behind. Mark made a mental note to fetch the valise and said, "I have a big bed, you may sleep with me, Uncle Ruben. It is better than the cot."

Joel talked his heart out to his wife but she kept reminding him all too often that he was neglecting his own family.

"There is so much poverty in Lodz, and now the Jews are expelled from Germany. We need money to give them shelter, jobs, food. What we're doing is a drop in the bucket. It seems that war is near. Now the Poles are dancing on the grave of Czechoslovakia. The next corpse could be Poland. We can easily get certificates to emigrate to Palestine for we have enough money to buy them. I'll sell the factory, but what I'll do in Palestine? And the climate, they

say, is like a hot oven. I heard that they all suffer from malaria. But the life for Jews in Poland is going from bad to worse. What to do, Basha?"

On a sunny September day the victorious German Army marched into Lodz. It was a parade of strength. The soft asphalt of the main street bent under the weight of the motorcycles which were followed by tanks, trucks and cars. The young soldiers in their shiny uniforms kept laughing and singing *Heili, heilo* and *Erika* and the victory over the city of Lodz had the smell of beer. The Nazis ignored Solna Street, but the Jews on Solna closed their windows and locked their doors.

Showing resignation and calmness, according to its tradition, Lodz was a quiet and open city on that warm September day of the golden Polish autumn. But almost immediately there was a shortage of food. Joel didn't fit into the new times of lawlessness, constant fear and long lines for food. Mark was fast on his feet and as soon as the stores opened for the distribution of food at dawn, he usually had started a vigil in a queue for bread. One day he waited patiently in the bread line for some hours when his friend Hans, in a brand new Hitler-Jugend uniform, pulled him out, shouting, "Jude, raus!"

Rage quickly overcame Mark and all rational thinking disappeared, displaced by an urge to kill. He hit Hans hard and blood oozed from his broken nose and mouth.

Later that day Hans' father spoke secretly to Joel. "Send Mark away, now," he said. "Hans went to the Gestapo demanding your son's arrest. I don't have to explain to you what it means. Hide Mark and tell him to leave Lodz, to leave Poland. See, Joel, I am afraid of my own son." He shook his head sadly.

Mark spent the night in the spacious apartment of his uncle, the jeweler, on Freedom Square. From the window he saw the dismantling of the Kosciuszko monument by the Nazis. The national Polish hero was now lying in the street, his bronze face down facing the gutter, and the German soldiers after a few beers were relieving themselves on his bronze back. They smoked and spat, their bellies shaking with laughter, their hands on their belt buckles with the engraved words: *Got mit uns*. (God is with us.)

"Ya, ya," Mark heard them say of terrorized Jews, "they look so *komisch* in their fear. Ha, ha, ha, Poland's second largest city has no sewer, the filthy *klo* is in the courtyard, and the big slum of Baluty is *schrecklich*. And did you see their main street? Real savages, the Poles. Ha, ha, ha," they roared in laughter as they stomped on Kosciuszko's bronze head.

Mark's mother came with money. She'd thrown only a shawl on her shoulders on that cold, late autumn day. "Mark, flee to Russia," she said. "It's the only country open to us. Hans is looking for you everywhere. We'll stay in Lodz, but," she hesitated for a moment, "take Mala and her husband with you."

Mala's husband! The pious and conservative brother-in-law who moved cautiously and slowly, accelerating his steps only when he saw Mark in the street. There was no love lost between Mark and Joseph.

"No," he shrugged off the proposal, "it's too much responsibility. He's not fit for the trip."

Mark kissed his mother and said, "Keep Uncle Ruben home. Don't let him go."

"Like father, like son," Basha said, with an effort of a smile. "I promise you that we'll stay together. You'll find us here after the war."

She gave him the money tucked in a small envelope and without looking at him, she said lightly, "Masha visited us today. Take care of yourself, Mark. Write letters home under a false name. Write, don't forget, write."

They kissed each other one more time and she left, a woman of a medium height, keeping her head straight against the wind, with a shawl on her shoulders.

Mark arrived in Bialystok which was occupied by the Russians. The city was bursting at the seams from the influx of refugees. Mark was looking for a place to sleep when suddenly his friend, Max, tapped his shoulder.

"We are in a city in complete chaos. Thousand of refugees are flowing into Bialystok from the West and the Jewish relief committees cannot handle the masses of homeless people. The Jews of Bialystok are not very friendly and they are even poorer

than the poorest Jews of Lodz. Now they see the big opportunity of their lives to make a buck and they're charging astronomical rent for a room or rather a bed to sleep. There is little compassion in their *Litvak* hearts for us and charity is not in their vocabulary. They speak Yiddish, supposedly the real literary Yiddish, that I hardly understand. They regard us as simpletons, big city crooks and thieves. It's a situation of no help, not from the Jews and not from the Soviets. It's everyone for himself. There are no jobs and little food. The only way of making a living is on the black market. For example, salt is relatively cheap in Lvov and expensive in Bialystok. Go by the rules of demand and supply. It's the only way of supporting ourselves without being at the mercy of the Jews of Bialystok.

"You can make contacts with the farmers around the city to sell their products on the black market. But be careful, the Secret Police are everywhere. Luckily they're easy to bribe. Always have money with you and bribe. Don't be afraid, bribe. They're hungry, too. Next thing you need is a pair of fast legs and wide open eyes."

Mark's travels to Lvov paid for a room he shared with his friend, paid for his daily bread and butter too, and for food packages he sent to his family at a new address: Litzmannstadt-Ghetto, Schneider Strasse. The new address gave him the information that they had to leave Solna Street and move to the ugliest, foulest part of the city. The few censored words in their short letters said nothing.

Mark lived dangerously in Bialystok but luck, which likes the company of the brave and the fools, was on his side. He wasn't caught by the police and the forbidden and profitable trade kept him comfortable on the surface of the turbulent, economic Soviet waters till the deportation of Polish citizens to Siberia started.

Siberia! On Solna Street the word alone, SIBERIA, caused a shudder down the spine.

Mark turned for help to the Jewish peasants he had dealt with during his short career in the illegal food market. They liked the boy with the Lodz inflection in his voice, a reliable buyer of their products in those unstable times, and they provided him with false identification papers. Three months later, at the age of twenty, Mark was recruited into the Red Army and sent for training to the Ural region. After all, Siberia awaited him!

His military service started in the best trained Ural division. He was a quick learner in the school of war and well prepared for the vigorous training in the double digit sub-zero temperature. The choice Ural division was called to defend Moscow, and the foot soldiers had to march three thousand kilometers from Magnitogorsk to Moscow—there were no trucks or armored vehicles!

They ate while marching, they slept while marching, they sang while marching. Women and children escorted them, touching them, crying and giving blessing. Even the women working in the fields and dragging shiny ploughs stopped in their labor and ran to pat the young faces of the marching soldiers. The song of the Ural Divisions written by a young captain filled the air, but with little jubilation and a lot of tears.

Lonya, the “Siberyak,” expected that Mark would crack under the harsh conditions of the Siberian winter and army training. He observed this Westerner who didn’t speak Russian well and didn’t need a glass of vodka to start a conversation. It was Lonya who had called him Vanya, a name given to him like a badge of merit. The name stuck to Mark and suited him well, together with the long military coat with its unfinished hem, the high pointed hat and a woolen mask to protect his face from frost.

“Mama,” Mark talked to his mother in Yiddish in a half-awake, half-asleep state during the long march. “Mama, you’ll never recognize me.” Mark spoke in Yiddish to remind himself who he was. Despite his cultural dislocation Mark looked like an integral part of the Russian landscape, a Vanya in Vanya’s land.

In the Battle of Moscow, which marked the first defeat of the Nazi Army, Mark received his first medal. From Moscow his division was sent to fight the Germans in Smolensk where they were encircled by the Germans. Five thousand Russian soldiers together with the high echelon of commanders of the Red Army surrendered to the Nazis.

Lonya approached Mark. “Vanya, I am not going into captivity. Come with me. Take as many guns as you can and we’ll go deep into the forest. The Krauts are afraid to penetrate the forest and I know the terrain well.”

Eighty soldiers joined Lonya.

The soil of the forest offered its warmth against the biting winds

of winter. The Partisans built deep earthen *zemplanki* (living quarters) and snow covered them like a blanket. They hunted for food and killed Germans stationed in the small Belorussian villages; they blew up bridges and derailed troop trains. The Nazis didn't dare to explore the forest unless led by an informer. In time the Partisan Army became well organized and powerful and was supplied by Soviet arms.

One summer day in the second year of partisan life, Lonya took Mark aside. He said, "We found a young woman not far from our quarters. She claims to be Jewish and wants to join the Partisans. Check her out."

The girl, in her early twenties, looked at Mark with tears in her brown eyes and said, "I have to admit that I had a German lover. He was my high school sweetheart and he hid me and saved my life. I am Jewish and my family was killed by the Nazis in...(she gave the name of a town nearby). But now they are sending Kurt back to Germany and he told me to join the partisans. He heard that you are here in this forest. I walked the whole day to find you. Believe me, I am not a traitor or an informer. I am running for my life. Nobody's left but me."

"You're a *schaine maidl*!" Mark used a common Jewish phrase for pretty girl, but she gave no hint of understanding.

Mark looked at the slightly tanned skin of her face, her big dark eyes and long eyelashes moist from tears and his gaze went to the long white neck with a fast pulsating artery, then to the full breasts under a clean blouse, down to the shapely legs in new boots. Drops of sweat appeared on his forehead and his face was burning red.

"Well," Mark said in a raspy voice, "tell me more about your parents."

She was not flirtatious and responded to his questions matter-of-factly, not putting herself in the best light, for it was clear that she was crying more for her German lover than for the family she had lost.

"Let me stay with you for awhile. You're my last resort." She didn't beg; she looked straight into his eyes searching for a response from the young partisan who came from under the earth and looked more like a cave man in his dirty, full of lice sheepskin,

than the young boy he was.

Lonya and Mark checked her bag. They found no documents, but every piece of her clothing was new, neatly folded.

"What do you think, Vanya?"

"I don't know if she's Jewish. She doesn't understand Yiddish, but many Jews don't speak the language. Her skin is tanned which proves that she was outside a lot and not in hiding. She's too well dressed for a person running for her life, as she told me. She admitted to a German lover, which in these circumstances is a bold and frank statement and also explains the new clothes in her bag, for only Germans could buy clothing in the stores. I'm not sure about her flight and her Jewish origin but she didn't give the impression of a liar. She's attractive and sexy and she may cause conflicts among us that we can't afford."

"We can't send her back for she now knows our location." Lonya looked at Mark again.

A council gathered that night to discuss the fate of the young woman. The Georgian vehemently opposed the few defenders of the girl.

"We are putting too many lives at risk. She may be innocent, but we have too many unanswered questions and we don't have the time or means for further investigation. She can't stay and she can't leave."

In the morning Mark saw two partisans, rifles on their shoulders, and the girl, the bag full of clothing in her hand, walking nobly in her new black boots, down the path leading to a small ravine. Mark didn't know what they told her and he went back to his subterranean lodging. Lonya observed the changes and declared, "Now you drink like a real Russian."

Captured Nazis were brought to Mark for investigation. They begged for their lives answering Mark's questions in their high or low German to his Lodzer Yiddish. "*Ya, ya, Herr Commandant, versteyt, versteyt,*" they repeated as sweat ran down their faces in the sub-zero temperature while they tried to comprehend the questions.

Were they the Germans Mark saw the last time on Freedom Square in Lodz? There was no Prussian arrogance in *these* men who were ready to convey all the war secrets of the Nazi Army.

Here, in the woods of Belorussia the grandiose German mythology of the human superrace, the myth of Niebelungen, Valkiries, Siegfrieds came to an end, and the Nazis were "Meister-Singing" all the information the Partisans needed for their operations.

That same year the Russian offensive started. Mark again joined the regular army. Young, high officers with their fresh energy and blooming health, kept coming to the army straight from military schools. They hadn't yet smelled the fires of the war, but they gave short orders in flustered voices.

A young lieutenant, who looked like he had just left his mother's house after a good breakfast, ordered: "Clean your guns, soldiers; they must shine like Jewish..." He used a vulgar Russian word for testicles.

Mark heard only "Jewish" and something snapped. He jumped on the young lieutenant, his hands straight at his neck. There were gurgling sounds and Mark saw a blue face and eyes going out of orbit. Lonya separated him from the limp body.

Without a trial Mark was immediately sent to the Punishment Battalions for a suicide mission, but he survived the Strafni Battalion and returned to the regular army.

In the Battle of Riga he was wounded and hospitalized in a ward full of soldiers with lunatic eyes and crazy but gleeful expressions on their faces. They walked aimlessly, talking incessantly to themselves or to their imaginary audience. Sometimes they burst into a military song or danced, but most of the time they mumbled. They must have been in a much happier world than the world around them for they were gay, insouciant, harmless. For the first time in four years Mark slept in a bed and slept the whole night, like a log, with no dreams, no memory, no pain.

The doctor asked, "What is your name? Where are you from? Do you know where you are now?"

"I am Vanya." Mark repeated with an untroubled smile, "I'm Vanya."

"No, in the documents you are Mark Kansky, born in Lodz. Does it ring a bell?"

It rang no bell for a month.

Mark left the hospital with a restored memory, with insomnia and an increased thirst for vodka.

"Don't drink," warned the doctor, "you've just recovered from a brain concussion and alcohol is deadly for the brain."

The colonel who gave him discharge papers from the hospital checked his records. "*Malchik*" (little boy), he said and Mark could have sworn that he saw glistening moisture in his eyes, "Ural, Moscow, Smolensk, Partisan in Belorussia. You have lived a life of a hundred year old man and you're only twenty-four years old."

The Red Army stopped the offensive on the east bank of the Vistula River, only seventy-five miles from Lodz.

"What are we waiting for?" Mark asked the captain.

"The Poles started the uprising without our permission. They listened to their commanders in London who are giving them orders by radio. They'll pay for it. The Polaks hate us. Did you see the fliers over Warsaw? 'One enemy is retreating and the other enemy is coming.' The other enemy is us. They call us 'the red plague.' Let them rot and bleed to death."

He didn't know that Vanya was a Polish Jew and that a heartbeat away was Lodz. But the liberation of Lodz was not in store for Mark. Instead he was sent to the Battle of Poznan.

Mark was on his way to Japan when the atomic bomb speeded up the end of the war. He came back to Lodz a year after the war, wearing his Russian military coat covered with many shiny medals, medals "For the Victory," "For Courage," "For defense of Moscow," "For taking Riga, Warsaw, Poznan, Berlin."

The Russian officer in Rostov who gave Mark his discharge papers together with some money for the five years he served in the Army, said with a friendly smile, "Comrade Kansky, you have the highest medals. Complete the papers and we'll pay a monthly pension. Every ruble counts now."

"I am going back to Poland, I am a Westerner."

"We'll send money to Poland. Give me your address."

"No, comrade," Mark said. "No forwarding address."

Solna Street greeted Mark silently, with no trace of its former inhabitants. The janitor recognized Mark; he didn't believe his eyes and started to scream. "Oh, Jesus, Maria! Mr. Mark, you're alive! I am so happy to see you. You're the first tenant from before the

war who came back. No, I'm sorry," he continued, "nobody from your family. Not your uncles or cousins. A school teacher now lives in your apartment. Wait, wait. A girl, from the second floor—her head was shaved in Auschwitz—came and asked for her parents, but didn't leave an address. Her father was Weiss, the weaver."

Masha's alive, Mark thought, but that didn't make the evening brighter. The bad news seemed to be the worst thing that had happened to him. It wasn't. The worst thing was that he was numb, devoid of any emotions and so cold inside that he needed a drink to keep him warm and alive. He started to cough from the endless cigarettes and said, "Yan, do you have a bed to sleep for one night? And can I buy a bottle of vodka to celebrate my homecoming." Mark put money on the table.

The next day, after a whole night of heavy and silent drinking, Mark went to the Jewish Committee. The woman in the office opened a file and gave it to Mark:

Joel and Basha Kansky, deported to Chelmno 1942.

Ruben Kansky, deported to Chelmno 1942.

Mala and Joseph Stein deported to Chelmno 1942.

Simon Kansky died of starvation in 1943 at the age of sixteen.

Leo Kansky died of tuberculosis in 1943 at the age of fourteen.

"If you wish," she said, "we can help you to find your brothers' graves."

"No, thanks," Mark said, "I'll come some other time," and he left the office. He badly needed a handkerchief to wipe his wet face. He looked at the sky. Not a trace of rain. It was a sunny May day in Lodz.



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